

Boeing machinists strike continues

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The strike by 27,000 Boeing machinists in the states of Washington, Oregon and Kansas is in its seventh day with no negotiations scheduled.

The decision to strike reflects the determination of workers to reverse the concessions that Boeing has wrested, with the help of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) bureaucracy, in the past several contracts. Boeing workers walked out for 28 days during the 2005 contract negotiations.

After negotiations were officially ended with the expiration of the contract last Wednesday, Seattle IAM District 751 President Tom Wroblewski and IAM negotiator Mark Blondin announced a postponement of the strike for 48 hours despite an 80 percent vote against the contract offer and 87 percent strike vote.

The two-day extension—made at the request of federal mediators and the governor of Washington—was met with an explosion of anger from rank-and-file workers who denounced the move as a “sellout.” Wroblewski and Blondin had to be escorted out of the meeting, according to local media.

Workers are angered over the company’s wage proposals—11 percent over three years, even as inflation is rising 6 percent annually—and the company’s demands that workers pay greater out-of-pocket medical expenses. Boeing earned a record \$4.1 billion in profits last year and paid its top CEO \$14.7 million.

Workers are also opposed to the company’s plans to further outsource jobs and drive down wages and benefits by forcing workers to compete with lower-paid outside contractors, some of whom are working side by side with union workers inside the plants.

Since the 2005 contract, productivity has sharply increased to the point where one 737 aircraft rolls out of the Renton, Washington facility every day, and seven of the larger 777s are produced monthly at the Everett, Washington facility. According to the IAM Local Lodge 781 web site, “In 1990 Boeing delivered

285 airplanes with over 43,000 IAM members. Last year, Boeing delivered 441 airplanes with less than 25,000 IAM members. While new technology and lean activities may have accounted for some efficiency improvements, a big part of why it took fewer members was increased subcontracting.”

A Letter of Understanding (LOU #37) signed in 2002 between the IAM and Boeing allowed nonunion contractors access to the assembly line in place of higher paid union workers. This was part of a series of measures the IAM accepted that severely undermined contract language limiting outsourcing.

Up until then the company was not allowed to lay off any union workers as a direct result of outsourcing. It was also required to give the union six months to review work targeted for outsourcing so the IAM could offer a “business plan” to keep the jobs in-house, in effect bidding against outside contractors by proving IAM workers could do the work cheaper and faster. The 2002 deal added five “exceptions” to the union review process, including outsourcing to countries where Boeing was selling planes and to outside contractors, which “share” business risks.

There was massive opposition to the 2002 contract—with 62 percent of workers rejecting the deal. Despite this opposition, the IAM bureaucracy was able to impose it because less than two-thirds of workers voted to strike amid the steep industry downturn after the 9/11 attacks. Since then Boeing’s IAM workforce has been reduced from 60,000 to 27,000, with the bulk of the cuts taking place in Washington.

Production of the Dreamliner, Boeing’s newest airplane, is the high point of the company’s efforts to undermine the wages and benefits of its workers. Designated the 787 and described as the most technologically advanced airplane in the world, the Dreamliner is planned by Boeing to compete head to head with Airbus’s A380. Boeing claims that with

advanced engines, aerodynamic improvements and lighter materials the 787 will be 20 percent more fuel efficient.

Instead of the conventional construction of a plane “from the ground up” in Boeing’s Seattle plants, production of the Dreamliner is distributed across the world—in Italy, Japan, France, Sweden, India—with parts and entire sub-assemblies manufactured by many companies. The wings and central wing box will be built in Japan; the horizontal stabilizers are manufactured in Italy.

New Breed Logistics, a nonunion company located in the right-to-work state of North Carolina, will provide logistical support in synchronizing the arrival of various parts to Boeing’s Everett plant where final assembly, with only 800 to 1,200 employees, will take three days. This is less than a quarter of the time traditionally required. This is the same procedure developed by Boeing to assemble a new 737 every day.

The current strike threatens to delay production of the Dreamliner, which is already behind schedule. Originally planned to have first flight by September 2007, the first 787 was rescheduled for maiden flight in the last quarter of 2008 with initial delivery by the third quarter of 2009.

According to the September 11, 2005 *Seattle Times*, “Internal company documents show that by 2011 Boeing plans to roll out a new 787 every two days.” The same article explains that Boeing would eventually like to build two jets every three days.

Taking a page from the United Auto Workers, which encouraged workers at different plants to win work by being the lowest bidder, the IAM’s “defense” of jobs is qualified by how much more “competitive” Boeing workers can be than nonunion contractors. For its part the IAM bureaucracy is seeking to retain a minimum “head count” of dues paying members, no matter what their wages and working conditions.

Boeing officials are opposed to removing any of the “exceptions” they won in 2002 and insist that rapidly changing market conditions dictate that they move quickly on outsourcing decisions without being hamstrung by a six-month union review process.

In an interview after talks broke down last week, IAM International President Tom Buffenbarger insisted that the union had no interest in interfering with the company’s prerogatives and profits. “They think we

are trying to wrestle away their right to run their business,” he said. “Far from the truth. We’re trying to show them how to run the business better.”

While Boeing has demanded concession after concession from workers it is apparently committed to continuing providing perks to the IAM bureaucracy through various labor-management schemes. Their 2008 contract proposal states, “The company will continue to invest in the IAM/Boeing partnership at a minimum of \$15 million annually, including an additional \$1 million to focus on productivity improvement and employee engagement.”

While IAM workers conduct their strike in several states, members of Boeing’s professional union, the Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace (SPEEA), representing 21,515 technical workers and engineers, continue to work. This, even though SPEEA president Cynthia Cole told IAM members “We are with you. SPEEA is here today and at your side in this fight.” Conversely, during the 2000 SPEEA 40-day walkout, the IAM’s guarantee to abide by its no-strike clause resulted in their members crossing SPEEA’s picket line. SPEEA will begin contract negotiations with Boeing this October.

Boeing workers can only defend their interests if they take the conduct of this struggle out of the hands of the IAM and begin organizing an independent struggle to unite aircraft workers in the US and internationally against the continuing assault on jobs and living standards.



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